
August 8 and after:

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Post-Tiger Tamil politics today by Dayan Jayatilleka The history of Tamil politics is the history of a struggle between two tendencies. This was so well before Prabhakaran and continued during the Tamil Eelam wars in the form of the Tigers. The first elections after the defeat and military destruction of the LTTE reveals that Tamil politics remain dominated by the struggle between these two tendencies, but that the balance of strengths between these tendencies has changed, especially in the crucial town of Jaffna, the head and heart of Tamil politics.

While a municipal election does not usually qualify as historic, the elections to local authorities in Jaffna and Vavuniya certainly are. They are the first elections to be held in the centers of Tamil political life after the end of the Thirty Years War of secession with the conclusive defeat of the Tigers. While it is true that the percentage of voters who exercised their franchise was low, that is usually the case with elections held during a civil war or in the immediate aftermath of one, during the phase of pacification. What is more important than the low poll is that the Commissioner of Elections certified that it was free and fair, and if a cynical eyebrow were to be raised at that verdict, the stark fact is that not a single act of lethal violence occurred during the election campaign or on polling day. This, taken together with the radical difference in the Jaffna and Vavuniya outcomes, confers considerable legitimacy on the process and the results. Jaffna That the victor in Jaffna, the epi-centre of Tamil politics and consciousness, was Douglas Devananda and his party the EPDP, contesting under the UPFA umbrella, is yet another factor that makes the election of August 8th historic. For too long has the gunfire of the Tigers been heard as the voice of the Tamil people or confused for it. For too long have the slick lobbyists and raucous demonstrators of the Tamil Diaspora crowded the field of Tamil political representation. For too long have the puppets and proxies of the separatist terrorist Tigers, been marketed as the moderates that Colombo has to settle with. With their vote at the elections of August 8th 2009, the Jaffna people have breached the entrenched order of Tamil politics. Though he was obviously not a candidate at these municipal elections, the Tamil people of Jaffna have opted for Douglas Devananda as their next leader. By doing so, the Jaffna voters have rejected the TNA which was the chorus line for the Tigers who took the Tamil people into successive wars which ended not merely without success but disastrously, with much damage, devastation and many reversals being suffered by the Tamil community as a whole. They have opted instead for a man who warned against these wars and opposed them, and whom Prabhakaran tried to kill eleven times. Devananda is a moderate with a difference: a former armed militant who made the transition to democratic politics within a united Sri Lanka, following the Indo-Lanka Accord. He is a Tamil ex-militant who knows how to work the Sinhala system, having been closely associated with three Sri Lankan presidents: Premadasa, Kumaratunga and Rajapakse. He has done so with continuity of position and perspective. Devananda is a Tamil nationalist but not an ultranationalist. He is a constructive nationalism, which he impishly likens to "good cholesterol" in contradistinction to the LTTE's and TNA's "bad cholesterol". He is a bridge between the North and South. The Tamils need a man who can talk to the System, get it off their backs and secure that which is needed to regenerate as a people. The Sinhalese need a man they can talk to from among the Tamils, who isn't nostalgic about the LTTE or going to work for their eventual resurgence; a man who will respect their desire for the preservation of the unitary character of the Sri Lankan state. Devananda is that man, committed to a united Sri Lanka, while trying to re-set both Tamil and Sri Lankan governing consciousness along the lines of a pragmatic consensus. While this makes him the natural and logical interlocutor for the Sri Lankan state and Sinhala society, that may not be self-evident to those who would paradoxically prefer the TNA as dialogue partner because then an open-ended political process of negotiations can take place with neither endgame nor roadmap/time table. Vavuniya The TNA won in Vavuniya, the political centre of gravity of the Wannii. The Jaffna and Vavuniya municipal election result opens a new chapter in the history of Tamil politics. Those politics have been dominated by three failed projects and two opposing tendencies. The three failed slogans are 50:50, federalism and Tamil Eelam. Variants of these are the con-federal draft constitution drawn up by a UK firm of lawyers in the late 1990s, the ISGA and PTOMS. The TNA is planning to stay within the same paradigm with its old-new slogan of "internal self-determination" which is unrealistic for a party that backed a separatist terrorist army which in turn has experienced a crushing defeat from which there can be no military recovery (going also by the Sri Lankan 'shock and awe' achievement of bringing KP home to justice). While Tamil politics has experienced three failed projects and slogans within three historical periods, it has also witnessed a division into two broad tendencies. These are, on the one hand the bourgeois nationalist and petty bourgeois ultranationalist tendency, essentially pro-imperialist, represented by the FP, LTTE, TNA and the dominant line in the Tamil Diaspora, and on the other hand the progressive tendency represented by the Communists, Samasamajists and Maoists in Jaffna in the pre-Tamil Eelam period, and the EPRLF, PLOTE, NLFT and EPDP during the period of the Eelam struggle. Unlike the first, the second tendency, that of the progressives, was marked by two political motifs: a readiness to settle for regional autonomy within a united Sri Lanka, and a search for alliances with the progressives of the Sinhala South. With less than a year to go for parliamentary elections, and with provincial elections in the North highly probable as international pressure mounts, the stakes for the Tamil people and the country as a whole are far too high for a united front of these Tamil progressives — a Tamil Democratic United Front or Tamil Democratic People's Front — not to be formed almost immediately. Such a regrouping would stand for a bloc with the progressive centrist forces in the South, countervailing the influence of ultranationalists of both ethnicities and offering Sri Lankan Tamils a hope of a better and different future. (These are the strictly personal views of the writer) Courtesy: Island.lk